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ABSTRACT

From 1998-2001, students in Spanish classes at the University of Texas San Antonio competed surveys regarding how they defined their language skills and how they felt about special courses. A total of 642 students, of whom 482 were Hispanic, completed surveys. Overall, 70 percent of the students thought that if heritage courses were offered, they should be optional. All of the students felt it was important for students to be able to benefit from what they already knew to make an A or to improve their grade point average. Only 42 percent thought heritage courses should even be offered (not required). Nearly all of the students thought that one course sequence was sufficient. Seventy percent of the Hispanic students called themselves true beginners, even though more than half of them heard or spoke Spanish at home or in the community. About 80 percent would not register for heritage classes, and 30 percent thought heritage classes would be too demanding. About 60 percent requested study of cross-cultural communication, and 90 percent requested that study of the Hispanic cultural heritage of the southwest be included in their Spanish courses. The language profile questionnaire is appended. (Contains 34 references.) (SM)

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SPANISH FOR HERITAGE SPEAKERS: AN ISSUE OF DEFINITION AND A QUESTION OF PREFERENCES AND BELIEFS

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Spanish for Heritage Speakers: An Issue of Definition and a Question of Preferences and Beliefs

An Important Group of Students

Throughout the Southwest and indeed throughout the United States, the topic of special Spanish courses for heritage speakers of the language is a timely one. At the present time, proficiency in more than one language is highly valued, and heritage speakers themselves are valued as well. Thus the best ways in which to serve the needs of such students is the topic of broad-based discussion. Previous Secretary of Education Richard Riley (2000) underlined the need for us as a nation to make better use of our language resources and therefore to serve our heritage students well. There has been discussion of heritage courses for thirty years and more, and they have come and gone and come again in a variety of institutions and under a variety of titles ranging from Spanish for Spanish Speakers to Spanish for Native Speakers to Spanish for Heritage Speakers. They have met with differing levels of success in meeting student needs and in being chosen by the targeted students, but there is a general consensus in the profession

that such courses are beneficial if they comprise certain topics and approaches (Pino, 1997).

The Current Unclear Program Profile

Only 26 percent of institutions of higher education offered such classes in 1990 (Wherritt, 1990), and only an estimated 32 percent do so now. There is no data available regarding the number of heritage speakers who might want such courses but find them unavailable, and there is no data correlating the existing programs with demographics to determine whether the courses are being offered in the places where they would reach the greatest number of students. There is likewise no data analysis to tell us about break-even points, that is with what number of potential students an institution can successfully field a program. We can speculate, however, that the number of offerings for heritage speakers is low relative to the population. As an additional point of confusion, we must also note that in some institutions, particularly in South Texas (as at the author's institution, for an example), there have been "regular" course sequences populated with false beginners of all sorts (prior study of the language, heard/spoken the language at home, lived abroad, etc.) and special courses for "true beginners"

rather than a regular sequence of true beginners and false beginners who have no Spanish in the home and heritage classes for those who do have Spanish in the home, even if only to hear. Thus in some instances there are other groupings created to meet student needs in a different way, further complicating the attempt to understand the true state of the profession in this regard. (Gonzalez Pino, 2000) This pattern of courses may be created because the heritage courses didn't draw sufficient enrollments, as in the author's institution, or because in some institutions the number of true beginners is extremely small, and they can be better served in their own sections.

Needing and Heeding the Students' Viewpoints

One area about which the literature has been relatively silent until recently is how the students define themselves in relation to such programs. As noted above, course names have varied; but, in addition, the types of students who have been considered for such courses has varied widely. There are students who hear the language in the home, who hear it only in relatives' homes, who hear it with friends, who hear it in the community, who hear it in the media and who hear it in any combination of these settings.

There are those who in addition speak the language in any of these settings or in any combination thereof. There are those who read and write the language and those who don't. There are those in all the above categories who were born in the United States and those who were born in a Spanish-speaking country. There are those who were born in another country and received extensive education there, just as there are those who were born elsewhere but came here early in their lives. There are those who speak "marked" forms of the language and those who speak "standard" forms. Guadalupe Valdes (1997) has provided an excellent analysis of all these subsets of students, all of who may be served by heritage language programs. Many programs have addressed themselves primarily to the more fully proficient heritage students, with less attention to those with primarily listening comprehension skills (D'Ambruoso, 1993), but when examining program profiles one can find every sort of combination.

The primary reason for this fluidity or flexibility is that there are no commonly-used methods or tests for placement of heritage students and no commonly-agreed upon sequence or typology of courses for them matched to Valdes' categories or combinations thereof. As noted by Schwartz (1985) and LeBlanc

and Lally (1997), a variety of approaches are used to place students, ranging from self-placement with guiding rubrics, thought to lead to overestimation of skills (Jordan, 1985), interviews with professors, portfolios (Sandrock), credit equivalencies from high school, to standardized and course-specific tests, which some researchers find very effective (Blackie, 1997). However, most tests measure listening and reading comprehension skills and thus do not separate the students who speak or write the language from those who do not and may place students who have never seen the language in print before the test in upper-level classes (as in the author's institution) . In addition, much has been said in the literature about how students can and do manipulate tests, interviews and questionnaires to receive the placements that they want (often in the regular sequence). (R. LeBlanc and Painchaud, 1985, Wherritt, 1990).

The Studies and their Findings

In light of all the attention that has been given to the difficulty of placing heritage students appropriately, as noted above, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to determining what students themselves think and want on the

subject. During 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001, the author has surveyed students in Spanish classes in her institution and determined both how they define their language skills and how they feel about special courses. The surveys were completed by a combined total of 642 lower-level students, of whom 482 (or 75%) listed themselves as Hispanic. Several questionnaires were used (see Appendix for sample) to gather information about various aspects of program structure and student preferences, but they all had in common certain questions regarding students' views of their own language proficiency and their wishes regarding course offerings. In aggregate the students indicated the following:

- A clear majority (70%) of the students thought that if heritage courses were offered, they should be optional. Students, in their view, should be able to register into any course for which they did not have prior credit.
- One hundred percent of them indicated that students' being able to benefit from what they already knew to make an A or improve their grade-point average was important. This statistic was borne out in the new 2001 survey as well.
- 76% thought mixed classes were helpful so that the less proficient could learn from the more proficient, unlike some reports of intimidation (Loughrin-Sacco, 1992).
- Only 42% thought heritage courses should even be offered (not required).
- 94% of the students thought one course sequence was sufficient.
- Seventy per cent of the Hispanics called themselves true beginners, even though more than half of them indicated

hearing or speaking Spanish in the home, with the family or in the community (Gonzalez Pino and Pino, 2000).

- Eighty per cent would not register for heritage classes (Gonzalez Pino, 2000).
- Thirty percent thought heritage classes would be too demanding.
- In 2001, forty percent of those with Spanish in the home wanted listening and speaking in the class but did not request reading, writing and grammar.
- In 2001 60% agreed that although they had been around Spanish, they did not consider themselves Spanish-speakers.
- Half of the 60% in an advanced Spanish class who had been around Spanish stated they were true beginners in 2001.
- 50% again as many requested listening, speaking and vocabulary expansion than requested help with reading and writing skills in 2001, contrary to needs identified in some of the literature, although Kondo indicates a similar preference on the part of students.
- 60% requested study of cross-cultural communication.
- 90% requested that study of the Hispanic cultural heritage of the Southwest be included in their Spanish courses.

Among their comments were: "For those of us born in the United States, there are not two types of English classes", presumably meaning for those students for whom English is their only language and for those who are bilingual. Ten percent thought it was discriminatory to offer two tracks. Some stated that offering two tracks was a waste of time and/or money.

Interpreting the Results

Clearly the students in this sample do not favor heritage classes. Further, many of those students whose professors would call them heritage speakers do not so define themselves. These two findings may be related, although certainly the wish to start at the beginning and to be sufficiently advantaged to make an A or improve grade-point average plays a role as well. There seems to be at least a slight contradiction in students who call themselves true beginners and yet believe that what they know will help them earn an A in a Spanish class. One can only surmise that they sense that they know something and that the something will help them in their classes but that they believe the "something" to be of such little consequence that it does not entitle them to call themselves heritage speakers, native speakers, or Spanish speakers of any kind. According to Leon Schwartz, 40% of California students register below placement level; but, given the inadequacy of tests already mentioned and the fact that credit is seldom offered for skipped courses (Wherritt and Cleary), students may be making very rational decisions. There is a concern in the literature for the cost of reteaching students the same skills (LeBlanc and Lally), but

apparently these students do not think they are repeating anything unnecessarily.

There is also an implied concern that students won't attain the maximum proficiency when enrolled in the regular courses. Research suggests that many heritage speakers attain Advanced proficiency by their fourth year (Hiple and Manley), although the data is unclear, since in some studies one can't tell the level of proficiency at which the students began. There is also an implied concern that, if students who speak a non-prestigious dialect are to add a standard variety of language to their repertoire, they may not have time to do so during a two-to-four semester sequence, as 600 contact hours may be required for such a shift (Hidalgo).

The students in this sample may well have been influenced by prior teachers' and professors' attitudes toward their level of proficiency and/or their variety of language to believe that they are not Spanish speakers of any sort, as many of them indicate in their responses. Studies by Perez-Leroux and Glass and by Koike and Liskin-Gasparro reveal the frequent negativity of such attitudes and their corresponding negative effect on students. In that light, the students' responses may be perfectly logical.

An area in which the students and the literature do agree concerns the desired and desirable content of courses. Listening and speaking are now deemed important by authors of texts for bilinguals (Blanco, Contreras and Marquez; Roca), and by the students in this sample. Vocabulary expansion through content-based instruction (Sanchez, Carrasquillo, Segan) and sociolinguistics/language analysis (Merino, Treuba and Samaniego), are recommended. Southwest culture, including Chicano literature, is included, too, even though some studies (Gonzalez Pino and Pino, 1997) show mixed results with actual implementation, as some students report they don't like reading about poor people. Culture contact is also enhanced by community projects utilized in some programs (Trueba, Pino, Varona, Cubillo). In the author's 2000 study, infusion of Southwest culture material comparing Southwest and standard Spanish and of selections from Chicano literature into even a regular sequence relates to students' expressed desires and preferences and produces positive results.

Heritage language educators need to inform themselves further regarding students' beliefs and preferences and consider the potential effects of the students' linguistic self-concepts as

revealed in this study. If even some students in other institutions believe as do those at the author's institution that they don't belong in heritage courses, much effort will be required to assist them to recognize, acknowledge and value the skills they have. We may still be a considerable distance from Riley's recommendation and goal of serving these students well. We can honor their requests and the recommendations in the literature by infusing our curriculum with Southwest culture, the comparison of Southwest and standard Spanish, and appropriate communication opportunities; but we may have to do so in our regular Spanish course sequences as well as in any special courses or course sequences that we nay have in order to reach all our Hispanic students, be they Spanish-speaking or not. The ones who really are true beginners will then still learn about their culture and the regional language as well, even if they don't speak it. The ones who are convinced that they don't know Spanish even though they do have some degree of proficiency in it can also study these important topics in the comprehensive mode mentioned by Valdes-Fallis.

The intransigent problem that remains, however, is one of lost potential. If these students saw themselves as

Spanish/native/heritage speakers, if they thought they could benefit from special Spanish classes, if special classes were available, if students chose to take them despite grade and credit concerns or optional placement policies, if the classes were good and contained all the desired and needed elements, what wonders could we accomplish then? Could we take Intermediate and Advanced proficiency students and move them to Superior? Quite possibly. If such is our objective, however, evidently we have far to go to restructure the experiences these students and other younger students like them have with their language before we meet them and in our classes and to convince them that they already possess valuable knowledge and skills upon which to build their studies, their growth in proficiency and their greater understanding of culture.

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APPENDIX

LANGUAGE PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE

To serve our students of Spanish better, we'd like to adapt our program based on the language profiles of our students. Thus we need more information and hope that you will assist us by answering the following questions anonymously. We appreciate your help. When we refer to heritage/Spanish-speaker, these are courses which assume the student has been around Spanish a little (lower level) to a lot (higher level) and which target reading, writing, vocabulary expansion and culture and emphasize listening and speaking skills less than in courses for true beginners.

AGE RANGE (Check one.): ____Under 25 ___26-39 ___ Over 40 GENDER: ___M ___F

FAMILY LANGUAGE BACKGROUND (Check the one that best fits your background.):

__1. I did not speak Spanish at home nor with relatives.
__2. I did not speak Spanish at home but did with relatives or friends..
__3. I heard Spanish at home but did not speak it.
__4. I did not hear Spanish at home but did with relatives.
__5. I spoke Spanish at home and with relatives.
__6. I spoke Spanish at home, with relatives, and with friends.
__7. I spoke Spanish at home, with relatives and friends, and at school and/or work.

FAMILY RESIDENCE BACKGROUND (Check the one that best fits your situation.)

__8. I was born in the U.S., and so were my parents and grandparents.
—9. I was born in the U.S., as were my parents; but my grandparents were not.
__10. I was born in the U.S., but my parents and grandparents were not.
__11. I was born outside the U.S.

YOUR VIEW OF YOUR SPANISH LANGUAGE SKILLS
(Check the one that best fits you.)

__12. I am a true beginner in the language because I'd never spoken or studied it before now.
__13. I consider myself a learner in progress because I'd been around the language at home.
__14. I'm a learner in progress who's been around the language at home and studied it before.
__15. I'm a learner in progress—I studied the language before but not been around it otherwise.

YOUR VIEW OF HERITAGE SPEAKER/SPANISH SPEAKER COURSES (Check one.)

__16. I would sign up for such a course at my level if the day, time, instructor, etc., were right.
__17. I would not sign up for such a course because I am a true beginner.
__18. I would not sign up for such a course even though I've been around Spanish some or a lot.

(If you checked #18, please continue. Otherwise, you are finished, and we thank you.)

CHECK ALL THAT APPLY:

__19. I want the regular sequence as I don't know the language well & don't want to miss things.
__20. I want to benefit from what I already know and be able to make an A in a regular class.
__21. Special sections are discriminatory.
__22. Special sections are likely to be too demanding.
__23. Even though I've been around Spanish, I don't consider myself a Spanish-speaker.
__24. In order to attract me a special course would need a better title, such as _____.
__25. I need a course with __listening __speaking__reading__writing__grammar__vocabulary.
__26. I'd like a course that included study of Hispanic cultural heritage in the Southwest.
__27. I'd like to study cross-cultural comparisons and intercultural communication.

__28. In a special course I'd like_____.

__29. Overall my opinion of such special courses is_____

__30. I understand ___% of what I hear in Spanish and respond in Spanish ___% of the time.

__31. I understand ___% of what I read in Spanish & can write Spanish _____.Thanks!

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